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ABSTRACT

The women's movement has made the issue of language usage an important part of its ideology and an even more important part of its rhetoric. Generally, the position assumed is that English is biased in favor of the male in terms of both syntax and semantics. Much of the work which women have published on this issue reflects a close adherence to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which asserts that language determines thought. Recent limitations which have been placed on this hypothesis have important implications for the rhetoric of the women's movement. Since linguistic bias is actually a symptom rather than a cause of social bias, feminists risk a loss of credibility by asserting a causative relationship between thought and language. Analysis of linguistic biases can, however, help to uncover the nature of underlying social biases, help to keep feminist issues before the public, provide a concrete index of progress toward eliminating social biases, and serve to boost women's morale and to improve their self-concepts. (KS)

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THOUGHT, SEX, AND LANGUAGE: THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS AS IMPLICIT IDEOLOGY AND RHETORICAL STRATEGY IN THE AMERICAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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When European explorers first arrived in the Lesser Antilles of the West Indies, they reported an astonishing phenomenon--that the men and women of this cultural group spoke different languages.[1] Although the reports of these explorers were exaggerated greatly, the fact remains that different varieties of the same language are used by men and women in several distinct cultures. Trudgill reports, for example, that lexical and phonological differences distinguish the language of men and women in many Asian and American Indian cultures as well as in British and American English.[2] He suggests that social roles are responsible in large part for differences in language use: "The larger and more inflexible the difference between social roles of men and women in a particular community, the larger and more rigid the linguistic differences tend to be."[3]

Race is another factor, in addition to sex, which is responsible for linguistic variations. Black leaders of the sixties, observing the close connection between language and social roles,[4] sought to rid the culture of its deeply-ingrained, negative stereotypes about black people. They popularized phrases defined by blacks for blacks in an effort to contradict prevailing views of white superiority. The term "black" replaced "Negro" in popular usage, while slogans like "Black Power,"[5] and "Black is Beautiful" were designed to promote pride and self-respect among black people.

The contemporary women's movement in the United States followed the main thrust of the black civil rights movement, and women naturally borrowed some of the ideological positions and tactics which the blacks had used. While blacks, at times, sought to establish their identity through the rejection of white society, feminists sought to create sisterhood and a new identity for women by negating or rejecting the identity of males.[6] Slogans such as "Sisterhood is Powerful" and "Bitch is Beautiful" paralleled "Black Power"

and "Black is Beautiful." Furthermore, women often described their feelings of oppression by means of analogies and metaphorical allusions to the subjugation imposed upon blacks: "In the life of each woman, the most immediate oppressor, however unwilling he may be in theory to play that role is 'the man.' Even if we prefer to view him as merely a pawn in a game, he's still the foreman on the big plantation of maleville."[7]

The women's movement, however, has gone further than the black movement did in making the linguistic issue an important part of its ideology and an even more important part of its rhetoric. Generally, the position taken by women in the movement is that English is biased in favor of the male in terms of both syntax and semantics.[8] Although Foss found no references to the issue of sexism in language in the speeches or written documents of three feminist groups during the first five years of the movement (1966-1970),[9] this subject clearly has permeated much of the work that feminists have published in scholarly journals and magazines in recent years.

With some notable exceptions,[10] much of the work which women have published on this issue reflects a close adherence to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis--that language determines thought. Murray illustrates this point when she claims: "Language is a powerful conceptual force, and, as a transmitter of society's deep biases, it can be a means of conditioning our thoughts. I think it has been amply demonstrated that words are not merely empty vessels of syntax and semantics. They can fairly overflow with implicit opinion, and they can and do perpetuate prejudice."[12] From this position directly flows a basic tenet in the ideology of many feminists--that by changing the language, cultural biases can be changed. Rosenfelt and Howe summarize this position when they state: "By calling our attention to sexist usage, the

feminists hope to change not only the language--the surface behavior--but the underlying attitudes that determine and, in constant interaction, are determined by behavior."[13] Thus, a major rhetorical strategy of feminists has been to attempt to change those elements of the language which are indicative of sexual biases.

This implication is one that might well have been drawn not only by Edward Sapir or Benjamin Lee Whorf, but perhaps by their German predecessors, Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt as well.[14] Whorf did much to popularize the hypothesis; at times he so closely connected thought with language that they were seen as one and the same phenomenon: "His [man's] thinking itself is language--in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese."[15] Whorf also saw clear practical implications for his position. A fire prevention engineer by trade, he argued that the problem of people accidentally starting fires by smoking near empty gasoline drums was a direct result of the fact that the word "empty" in English suggests the lack of a hazard.[16]

While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was accepted widely throughout the social sciences and humanities for many years,[17] recent evidence has been mounting against the view that language determines thought. Indeed, psycholinguists Foder, Bever, and Garrett conclude their review of the literature on this question by saying: "The best current evidence suggests that Whorf's hypothesis is probably not true."[18] In a survey of current research on this question, Schneider found that evidence from at least five different areas of scholarly inquiry qualify the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.[19] Thus, Gumperz appears to be correct when he argues that while language is important for communication and information processing, it does not determine cognition.[20]

Instead, language appears to be rooted in abstract cognitive processes.

The precise nature of the relationship between thought and language remains to be delineated. Nevertheless, the limitations which must be placed on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis have important implications for the rhetoric of the contemporary women's movement. First, the rhetorical strategy of feminists on the language question simply will not work in the way many of them expect. Changing biases in linguistic patterns will not automatically change social biases because the linguistic patterns themselves are manifestations, rather than causes, of underlying attitudes: "Linguistic imbalances . . are clues that some external situation needs changing rather than items that one should seek to change directly. A competent doctor tries to eliminate the germs that cause measles, rather than trying to bleach the red out with peroxide."[21]

Furthermore, because linguistic biases are symptoms rather than causes of social biases, feminists might have difficulty producing significant changes in language behavior as rapidly as they would like. As long as the underlying attitudes remain unchanged, some resistance to linguistic change must be expected. In addition, Lakoff suggests that any impact linguistic modifications have on society will be slow and indirect, occurring only if society is ready for such changes. She argues that this is the case whenever a symptom is treated rather than a cause.[22]

Finally, by adhering to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, feminists inadvertently have helped to perpetuate and diffuse an outdated, oversimplified, and basically inaccurate view of the relationship between thought and language. While this is an important implication in and of itself, it suggests a further problem: feminists may lose credibility as well as substantial segments of

their audience. Those familiar with the current evidence on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will fault feminists for their failure to qualify it; those less knowledgeable will become disillusioned when linguistic changes do not result in the direct attitude changes which they had expected.[23]

For several reasons, then, the linguistic philosophy adopted by many feminists must be modified. This does not mean, however, that the feminist position on the language issue is unimportant or completely dysfunctional. While linguistic changes introduced by the women's movement cannot be expected to produce attitude change directly, the strategy can function in ways valuable to the movement.

First, careful analysis of the linguistic patterns can help to uncover underlying social biases. Such biases often are interwoven so closely into the fabric of everyday life that they are difficult to identify. They form part of a taken-for-granted reality which is socially-constructed and culturally-shared.[24] A study of linguistic patterns can provide clues to the nature and extent of such biases as well as a means of demonstrating the existence of hidden or unconscious biases which society otherwise might deny. While most people acknowledge the existence of prejudices against women in employment and the like, many do not accept the notion that more fundamental prejudices are ingrained in cultural attitudes,[25] many of which manifest themselves in language. Farwell, for instance, points out that the feminine is considered seductive and dangerous, and suggests some of the ways in which language embodies this connotation: "Words, like temptress, wiles and beguiling are words usually associated with women, and in each case she is seen as someone who dangerously diverts a man from what should be important. The weather bureau assures us of this connotation when it periodically informs

us of the wanton destruction of a hurricane Agnes. It is interesting to note that this connotation of danger is the only active connotation or structure accorded women in our language, yet it is necessarily a derogatory one."[26] Conceivably, then, the feminist focus on language can serve to point out some of these less-observable stereotypes.

In addition, a focus on linguistic biases will keep feminist issues before the American public. And since salience is necessary before any social reform can gain acceptance, the language issue contributes to the process of recognition which must precede attitude change. The concern for linguistic changes, then, may serve to introduce outside publics to feminist notions in general. Increased exposure to nonsexist language such as "chairperson" and "he/she," for example, should cause many individuals to consider the effects of society's male orientation on all aspects of their lives. Thus, a focus on linguistic change can result in increased recognition and support for the woman's movement.

Another benefit of the feminist focus on language pertains principally to the participants active in the women's movement. Whereas many goals of the women's movement--such as changing the way women are portrayed by the media--are somewhat abstract and demand sustained amounts of time, energy, and funds, the attempt to achieve linguistic change provides a concrete, observable signs of progress that require no special resources beyond a desire to change one's own linguistic habits. As a pervasive and everyday phenomenon, language provides a natural arena in which feminists can work for changes on a day-to-day basis. In this sense, working for linguistic change seems to serve as a morale booster for women: the fruits of their efforts are visible, even if not immediately accepted, by all of society. And even those who do not see

the need to change the language are submitting to peer pressure to do so. In recent editions of textbooks, for example, "he" as the generic pronoun has been replaced by "he or she," "himself" has been replaced by "himself or herself," and so on. As with the change from "Negro" to "black," society can make these adaptations rather quickly, even if the underlying attitudes change more slowly.

The function of boosting morale may be far removed from the initial intentions of feminists--to bring about attitude change. Yet it may be the most profound outcome of the drive to rid language of its sexual biases because it will promote changes in women's self-concepts. Campbell has observed that the traditionally-inferior and unimportant roles of women in society have provided women with negative self-concepts, "so negative, in fact, that it is difficult to view them as an audience, i.e., persons who see themselves as potential agents of change."[27] In Women and Madness, Chesler argues that in order for women to enter the "mainstream of human action," they must experience "a frank passion for achieving the power necessary to define oneself--a power which is always predicated on the direct control of worldly realities."[28] For women, then, the value of changing linguistic patterns might lie primarily in the improvement of their own self-concepts; they will be closer toward gaining the power they need to define themselves on their own terms. Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff, an early twentieth-century poet, foresaw the potential power inherent to self-definition when she wrote:

I will be no docile thing--
But a restless eagle in space
Threshing is better than sowing
I have spread the seeds too long!

Now there is a rich harvest of the unknown--

Riot and strange thoroughfares

There is din of thunder

And storm in the air

Like the rumble of guns from afar . . .

I cannot be this ordered self forever![29]

NOTES

[1]This incident first was reported by Otto Jepersen in Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 237. It subsequently has been summarized in at least two other reports. See Cheris Kramer, "Women's Speech: Separate But Unequal?," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60 (February 1974), 14-24; and Peter Trudgill, Sociolinguistics: An Introduction (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974), esp. pp. 85-86.

[2]Trudgill argues, for example, that in Zulu, Chiquito, Koasti, and possibly Carib, lexical differences are evident which are based on sex. Some of these differences are the result of traditional taboos (pp. 84-102). An earlier survey which is similar to Trudgill's was reported by Paul Furley, "Men's and Women's Languages," American Catholic Sociological Review, 5 (October 1944), 218-33. Information on sex differences in the use of British English is reported in an article by Trudgill, "Sex, Covert Prestige, and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich," Language in Society, 1 (October 1972), 179-95.

[3]Trudgill, Sociolinguistics, pp. 94-95. An extended treatment of differences in men's and women's speech is provided by Kramer, esp. pp. 20-23. Among others, Kramer discusses women's more frequent use of questions in general, tag questions in particular, and roundabout ways of asserting opinions. Elsewhere, Kramer argues that some stereotypes about women's speech--particularly some mentioned by Jespersen--either are changing as society changes or never were valid in the first place. See Kramer, "Wishy-Washy Mommy Talk," Psychology Today, June 1974, pp. 82-86.

[4]Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," in The Rhetoric of No, 2nd ed., eds. Ray Fabrizio, Edith Karas, and Ruth Menmuir (New York: Holt, Rinehart,

and Winston, 1974), p. 60. See also Ossie Davis, "The English Language is My Enemy," American Teacher (American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, April 1967), pp. 13-15; rpt. in Language: Concepts and Processes, ed. Joseph A. Devito (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 164-70.

[5]An examination of the different interpretations given to the slogan "Black Power" by both blacks and whites was provided by Robert D. Brooks in "Black Power: The Dimensions of a Slogan," Western Speech, 34 (Spring 1970), 108-14. Among other findings, Brooks observed that "Whites far more frequently than blacks, perceived aggressiveness in 'Black Power'" (p. 111).

[6]Brenda Robinson Hancock, "Affirmation by Negation in the Women's Liberation Movement," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (October 1972), 264.

[7]Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, "Toward a Female Liberation Movement," pamphlet (Boston, 1968), in Voices from Women's Liberation, ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: Signet, 1970). Diane Hope, in "Redefinition of Self: A Comparison of the Rhetoric of the Women's Liberation and Black Liberation Movements," Today's Speech, 23 (Winter 1975), 17-26, discusses extensively both differences and similarities between the two movements.

[8]See, for example, Kristine L. Falco, "Word Consciousness: A Look at Sexist Language and Attitudes," Women on the Move: A Feminist Perspective, eds. Jean Ramage Leppuluoto et al. (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1973), p. 240; Casey Miller and Kate Swift, "One Small Step for Genkind," New York Times Magazine, April 16, 1972; Miller and Swift, "De-Sexing the English Language," Ms., Spring 1972; Ethel Strainchamps, "Our Sexist Language," Woman in Sexist Society, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 347-61.

[9]Karen A. Foss, "Ideological Manifestations in the Discourse of

Contemporary Feminism," diss. University of Iowa, 1976. Foss recorded the themes in the discourse of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), and The Feminists. Although she originally included language as a thematic category, no references to it were found, and the category was omitted. And Marie J. Rosenwasser, in "Rhetoric and the Progress of the Women's Liberation Movement," Today's Speech, 20 (Summer 1972), pp. 51-52, observes that the language issue did not arise until the third or current stage of the women's movement.

[10]See, for example, Robin Lakoff, Language and Women's Place (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

[11]That the women's movement seems to adhere to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on the issue of language does not mean that feminists purposefully have adopted this position. Indeed, many feminists probably are unfamiliar with the particular formulation offered by Sapir and Whorf. We are suggesting only that feminists have arrived at views which correspond to those of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

[12]Jessica Murray, "Male Perspective in Language," Women: A Journal of Liberation, 3, 50.

[13]Deborah Rosenfelt and Florence Howe, "Language and Sexism: A Note," MLA Newsletter, December 1975, p. 5.

[14]See Julia M. Penn, Linguistic Relativity Versus Innate Ideas: The Origins of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in German Thought (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

[15]Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956), p. 252.

[16]Penn, p. 31.

[17]There are, of course, some exceptions to the general acceptance of the Sapir-Whorf position. See, for example, Jean Piaget, The Child and Reality: Problems in Genetic Psychology (New York: Grossman, 1973), p. 172; and Max Black, "Linguistic Relativity: The Views of Benjamin Lee Whorf," Philosophical Review, 68 (1959); rpt. in Models and Metaphors (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University, 1962).

[18]J. A. Foder, T. G. Bever, and M. F. Garrett, The Psychology of Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics and Generative Grammar (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

[19]Michael J. Schneider, "Another Look at the Relationship Between Thought and Language," unpublished manuscript, Department of Speech and Dramatic Art, University of Iowa, 1976.

[20]John J. Gumperz, "Linguistic Anthropology in Society," American Anthropologist, 6 (1974), 185-98.

[21]Lakoff, p. 43.

[22]Ibid., p. 47.

[23]Feminists also could lose the support of some audiences merely because they have chosen to deal with the issue of language in any form. Many people--including some feminists--consider the issue extremely trivial and inconsequentil compared to the major legal and social barriers which still keep women from total equality. This could cause disgust with the women's movement and a loss of actual and potential strength.

[24]See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

[25]See, for example, Vivian Gornick, "The Next Great Moment in History is Theirs," Village Voice, November 27, 1969; rpt. in Popular Writing in America: The Interaction of Style and Audience (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 194-204.

[26]Marilyn Farwell, "Women and Language," Women on the Move, eds. Leppaluoto et al., p. 168.

[27]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (February 1973), 78.

[28]Phyliss Chesler, Women and Madness (Avon Books; New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 300.

[29]Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff, Atavism, cited by Marlene Dixon, in "The Restless Eagles: Women's Liberation 1969," The New Women, eds. Joanne Cooke, Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, and Robin Morgan (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1971), p. 60.